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AUTHOR DeLaney, Pat
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ABSTRACT

Anticipating the arrival of Southeast Asian refugee students for the 1975-76 school year, the Syracuse School District established, as part of the Special Needs Program, an English as a Second Language (ESL) program. The students were given intensive, half-day ESL instruction at a center and attended classes with their American peers at their home school for the remainder of the day. The students' families were from every extreme of Vietnamese and Cambodian society. The students were 5-17 years old. With extreme differences in educational backgrounds and needs, and with the wide age span, every possible ESL approach was used. Specific adjustments and emphases to help the students understand, participate in, and enjoy their strange new cultural and educational environment were made. In four months' time, the students had all progressed from being non-English speaking to understanding nearly everything said to them and to being able to make themselves understood in most situations. The survival English level was as measured by the Bilingual Syntax Measure. Their social adjustment at the center, and in their home schools, with the school district and with their peers, was found to be positive and generally happy. The ESL program, center concept, and individualization proved as successful as had been anticipated. (Author/JM)

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THE SYRACUSE ESL CENTER FOR REFUGEE STUDENTS

A report prepared for the New York State Education Department
by Mrs. Pat DeLany, Syracuse City School District
February 1976

Anticipating the arrival of Southeast Asian refugee students for the 1975-76 school year, the Syracuse School District established, as part of the Special Needs Program, an ESL center program at the Special Projects building. The decision to have an ESL program rather than a bilingual program was prompted by several factors; large numbers of refugees were not prevalent in the Syracuse area - families were dribbling in, and, even at the time school opened, numbers and names of students were unavailable. As the families were refugees who had come here of necessity and with little time for language or cultural preparation, an ESL program would help the students move quickly into the new lifestyle. It was also taken into consideration that, should the numbers of Vietnamese students prove to be small, an ESL teacher could work in other areas with students of other languages.

The center concept was initiated in preference to a tutorial approach in the students' home school. Provision for a comfortable cultural climate seemed not only good but necessary as it was realized that the abrupt uprooting and resettlement could be most detrimental to the students' self-concept as well as to cognitive development. Contact with other students in a class situation is also a key factor in the students learning quickly, retaining more and becoming more proficient in second language learning.

Consequently, the students have been given intensive, half-day ESL instruction at the center and attend classes with their American peers at their home school for the remainder of the day.

The students' families come from every extreme of Vietnamese and Cambodian society - from the highly educated interpreter to the illiterate fisherman. The 40 students, ages 17 - 5, range from a boy who reads and writes in three languages to a 16-year-old girl who is illiterate. With such obvious differences in educational backgrounds and needs, and with the wide age span, every possible ESL approach has been used with one student or another. We have made specific adjustments and emphases to help the students understand, participate in and enjoy their strange new cultural and educational environment.

Without exception, the students' most immediate needs were to understand what they heard and to be able to make themselves understood. Even Thanh, a 17-year-old boy, who could read and write English was at a complete loss when he was confronted with spoken English. Trying to talk was completely frustrating as, although he often knew what to say, he found he could not pronounce the English. Actually the younger children, with no preconceived notions of how English ought to sound and be said, had an easier initial aural/oral experience.

When the students arrived, we went through a name-learning procedure. The atmosphere became relaxed immediately when they realized that the teacher was going through as much of a learning experience as they.

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I couldn't say Ngoc because I was unable to hear the subleties of the Vietnamese oc, and the mouth formations were new to me. The children repeated and repeated until we were all laughing and they were asking me to say words which they were beginning to recognize and could not say. That first day they learned that we knew how difficult it was for them to "hear" English, that they could and should indicate lack of understanding, that no disgrace would be attached to an individual who did so, and that some aspects of English would be learned easily and others would require much more time. It took me about six weeks to learn to say Ngoc correctly, and by that time the students understood nearly everything we said to them.

During those first weeks, the entire thrust was aural/oral. We worked with experiential vocabulary - identification of things they saw, used and did daily, using objects, pictures and actions. Adjectives were developed, for example, through the use of antonym picture cards: empty-full, young-old, etc. For rich and poor there were pictures of a portly, elegantly-dressed gentleman and a ragged, scruffy man. We explained, "This man has money. He is rich. This man has NO money. He is poor." The next day five-year-old Van was jumping with excitement to tell everyone the words for the pictures and blurted out, "Money! No Money!" There was no question that she knew what she was talking about - in English. Demonstrable sentences such as, "I am standing," "You are sitting'" "We are going upstairs," gave the students basic patterns. From these, affirmative and negative statements and questions were developed incorporating their expanding vocabulary. As auditory comprehension and discrimination constitute the necessary base for speaking, new vocabulary was used in sentences as soon as it was taught, so that the students became accustomed to hearing words in normal usage rather than as isolated entities.

Each student reached the point of attempting to speak spontaneously at a different time. Eleven-year-old Thu began on the third day of class. Ten-year-old Nghia was the last to be confident enough to try to say anything she wanted. About eight weeks after the class had begun, she bounced off the bus, looked at a teacher and said, "You had hair cut - pretty!" Thu and Nghia are now the most verbal in their class and are a perfect example of the need for the language teacher to realize that readiness in ESL corresponds to readiness in any other area of learning. The girls are from very different backgrounds. Thu's family came from Saigon, her parents are well-educated and English-speaking, she and her sisters are encouraged to speak English, and her family is intact here. Nghia is from a small village, her mother is an uneducated, non-English-speaking widow, and, while five of her sisters and brothers are here, her two older, military-age brothers were not permitted to leave Vietnam. Initial adjustment had to have been far more difficult for Nghia.

As there are sounds in English which do not exist in Vietnamese, another aural/oral/visual procedure was provided from the beginning, to provide the students with the pronunciation skills they needed. Since the Vietnamese language uses the same alphabet as English (omitting the letters f, j, w, and z), and as the letters represent different sounds in each language, it was necessary to teach what sound the letter represents in English. A student, for example, might be able to read and understand the sentence 'The dog saw the cat.' When he attempted to say the same thing, however, it would sound to the American like, 'Za zak shaw za ke.' And more likely than not, the articles would be omitted in spontaneous speech as they are non-existent in Vietnamese. Learning sounds of a new language involves new lip formation, tongue positioning and usage, and differences in aspiration. We approached this directly by teaching first the sounds which consonants represent in spoken English, proceeding to blends (which do not occur in Vietnamese) and digraphs, then to vowels. These sounds were always used in words and the words in sentences.

Comparative phonologies of Vietnamese and English were made after the students were auditorily familiar with spoken English. Being familiar with both phonologies helped them to make confident comparisons; by this point they were able to identify that speaking English intelligibly was possible, and that specific phonological sounds and patterns presented the most difficulty for them. We had a truly fun first analysis of this when I showed them why, for example, I had been unable to say Ngoc and had been unable to distinguish the tonal differences of the names Thuy, Thủy, and Thụy. The students were eager to have their difficulties explained, and love games which sharpen and reinforce their ability to use words intelligibly and in context.

We've capitalized on and directed the intense competetiveness which the students exhibit, by having team games. Quang helped Nhan with er words. Thu drilled Hang on the very difficult th and s sounds. Others who mastered English inflection more rapidly (Vietnamese has none) worked with those who had more difficulty. Boys and girls are educated separately in the Southeast Asian countries and the boys, particularly, wanted to work separately from the girls. At first, we formed the teams this way. As it happened, however, the girls usually bettered the boys, and the boys were happy to be able to mix teams.

The secondary students, particularly, were impatient that we do more reading and written exercises with them. One of the major problems they encountered, however, was that, if they read English a little or well, they were confused by what they were actually hearing as opposed to what they had thought it sounded like, and were losing contextual sense because they felt the need to check nearly every word in a dictionary. We continued with aural/oral phonological stress until a student was proficient enough to look up only the particular words he really did not know. He was then programmed into reading and writing.

We have spent considerable time preparing for holidays and seasons, providing the students with pertinent vocabulary, helping them to understand customs related to holidays, and explaining the reasons for and necessity of dressing appropriately for the weather. They keep a daily data chart of date, temperature and weather conditions. Recently, when the temperature took a sudden jump from -18° to 30°, they told us it was hot outside. Some had dressed as if it were hot, which prompted an interesting lesson.

Halloween was explained primarily with stories containing pictures for each page of text. By Thanksgiving the children understood enough English that the students were not only able to understand a Mohawk Indian woman who talked with them about the first Thanksgiving, but asked her questions and learned a number of Mohawk words. Many will frequently give us an impish grin along with the Mohawk word for "thank you" or "goodbye."

A local television station had hoped to do a program sharing Vietnamese Christmas customs with Americans. We found, however, that most of the students were reluctant to talk about Vietnam - it was obviously painful for them, so we concentrated on Christmas itself and the American celebration. The students had shown extraordinary artistic ability so, rather than giving specific instructions, we suggested that they make Christmas decorations. The result was one of the most exquisite displays of talent we had ever seen.

The students were more willing to discuss Tet and their New Year celebration. Again, they made beautiful decorations, primarily using paper. At this time we discussed the American manner of reckoning age in contrast to the common Vietnamese custom of gaining a year at Tet. Most of our students celebrate their actual birthday; however, a few did not know the precise date, and have not celebrated it.

Music has been an important part of the program. Most of the children had learned several American songs at the relocation centers; they sang "Ten Little Indians" the first day. For Thanksgiving, we taught them "Over the River" which was easily demonstrable, and the traditional Dutch hymn, "We Gather Together," which they enjoyed more, though the meaning of the words was beyond them. They often hum it, even now. We played many Christmas carols and sang several, the favorites being "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" and "Jingle Bells," which they sang both in English and Vietnamese, and which was part of a Christmas television show featuring that, classroom procedure, and a presentation of their art work. They have also sung Vietnamese songs regularly, initially with the encouragement of two refugee Christian Brothers who have joined us twice a week to assist where possible, and to learn English and American classroom procedure.

We have read to the students from the first week, carefully selecting stories and poetry which used at least some vocabulary which they knew. The first week, I read "Little Red Riding Hood" and watched the delight as they recognized the words "eyes", "ears", "mouth", etc. We also made use of story records, following a book/record preparation with a film where possible, e.g. Disney's "Peter and the Wolf."

It was normal, we found, that the students began talking spontaneously to us before they did so in their home schools. Once the fear and reticence was bridged with us, however, it was not long before they began to talk with their other teachers and peers. We have maintained close contact with the home schools to insure a coordination of evaluation and procedure for each student. The outstanding quality exhibited by every student, age 5-17, was the desire and determination to succeed. If 16-year-old Hang could do 'x', 10-year-old Thanh was determined he could, too. If Tuyet, age 9, did 'y' well, Uyen, age 5, saw no reason why she could not. In regular classrooms, the same situation occurred; sixth-grade An, for example, insisted that he could handle the same English and social studies as his peers. With some high school students, this was partially true, but only insofar as their ability to read a textbook was concerned. Without exception, they, too, were completely lost in aural/oral situations.

Our obvious approach was to provide an individual program for each student, taking into consideration his age, background, ability, and present grade placement in school. For initial evaluation we administered the Harcourt-Brace/Jovanovich Bilingual Syntax Measure, which places a student at one of five spoken English levels: no English, receptive English only, survival English, intermediate English, and proficient English. Every student measured non-English speaking. Students who could read English were given the Random House Basic Test of Reading Comprehension, a criterion referenced test which placed them in one of five subsystems: non-reader, beginning reader, elementary reader, functionally literate, and good reader. Most of these students tested at the beginning reader level, with a few measuring non-readers. This substantiated what we already knew; as these students all were on secondary level, even their work with textbooks was slow and extremely difficult.

As we developed the individual student's program, we worked in close conjunction with the home school to assist them with suitable program implementation or adjustment. We met with school personnel and many teachers visited our program to see personally how we were working with the students. Results have been completely positive in a variety of ways. Older students' programs were adjusted to provide a maximum of courses in which cognitive development was least dependent upon English, e.g. stress on math and science, and in which social, psychological, emotional needs were best provided, e.g. art, physical education, etc. In one instance, three of four children of one family had been placed in grades 2 and 1, at the request of their parents. These children, 11, 9, and 8, were noticeably unhappy, though they were progressing well in English. A meeting of the parents, home school administrators, and teachers and ourselves resulted in grade advancement to peer level for these children. They adjusted readily and happily, and are doing extremely well. In another case, the teachers of a school, after visiting our program, realized that they were expecting less than the children were capable of handling. They did not, for example, use normal English in speaking to the students, and had not encouraged their American peers to do so. An adjustment on the part of the teachers resulted in an almost immediate growth in confidence on the part of our students.

We experienced some difficulty in setting up individual programs for the students. Obviously such an approach is time-consuming on the part of the teacher. Our major problem, however, and that of the teachers in schools as well, was student reluctance and even reticence to individualization. I've never encountered such intense desire to learn, such comparative competetiveness, or such personal dejection when self-imposed goals were not met. We faced the very delicate problem of stimulating and nourishing this admirable intensity and simultaneously preparing the student for successful total integration into his own particular school situation. Realizing that class sizes in Vietnam had been very large, often 80-100 per class, and that students were accustomed to a lecture/notetaking, reading/writing approach with teacher-identified common goals for every student, we knew we had to begin from this strong, understood foundation. Our initial vocabulary and sentence patterning development procedures provided this common goal approach. It was fairly easy to proceed with approximate age-level groups, where, for example, the kindergarteners' needs were basically similar and the children had not been conditioned to expect a common goal as the measure of success for all. The older the student was, however, the more difficult it was to begin where it was most advantageous to him.

We used what could be called a "why, how, when" approach. The inevitable question in each student's mind (usually expressed) was, "Why am I doing this? Why can't I do that? I must be able to do that." Our response was, "Right. You do have to do that and these are the things which will teach you how. We'll work with these now and when we finish that will be easy." Naturally, it was more complicated and individualized than the preceding statements; to sum it up, the student saw the most advanced or difficult task to be the teacher-established goal, both at the center and in his home school. It was, therefore, automatically his goal. Rather than discourage the student, we established the steps leading to the goal and thereby provided other goals which were realistic, enriching, and satisfying.

The students were totally inexperienced in self-direction of time and self-evaluatory materials and, while we had a wide variety of the latter, we restricted use of them until we could show the students how they could assist them to learn and why it was helpful to use them correctly. This concept was developed gradually and individually; each of our original students now works independently to the point that he will do everything he can with a given objective and then get our explanatory assistance for what he could not do. There are times nearly every day when students can select a game, tape, or exercise which they'd like to try. It's been a most rewarding proof of their grasp of individualization to see that when they can't understand how to use something, they bring it to us with the question, "When can I do this?" We can easily set up self-motivating, further goals.

We experienced one cultural problem which only time and a combination of firmness and example have begun to alleviate. In the early weeks we noticed strong aversion among the students. We quickly identified a tension between Vietnamese and Cambodians, but only gradually recognized that among the Vietnamese themselves there were caste-like distinctions, particularly where

a student was part Chinese, as several of them are. In a couple of instances, we had to prevent physical fights, and both times gave firm reprimands to the students involved. One Cambodian teenager informed us he would work with Americans but not with a boy whose mother is Chinese. Other than issuing strong reprimands when occasions demanded them, we didn't dwell specifically on the problem. We approached it from another angle, pointing out that they all needed and wanted help, and that they would receive more by cooperating, as our time and attention would not be wasted settling arguments. This approach seemed to create, at best, a truce, but, much to the students' credit, the truce lasted and we've been observing growing respect among those who had been hostile toward one another.

We noticed indications of confusion as regarded what was or wasn't respectful. Realizing that the students were encountering a far more casual society than what they had known, we made and continue to make definite observations on what is or is not respectful. The students have displayed a delightful sense of humor, a mastery of word-play, and a quickness to recognize when it is time for humor or teasing and when it is not. We've expressed admiration for their strong familial and cultural respect, and have suggested that it is a strength of character which we hope they will always treasure. In truth, it is, as their ease of integrating the more casual attitudes rapidly and well, is proving.

We have made an effort to meet and maintain contact with students' parents. To date we have met at least one parent of each family with two exceptions. In one case I have talked with the father several times and we have kept contact by note. In the other, I have met an uncle who lives with the family. We have grown very close to several families and have shared such joyous family occasions as baptisms and celebration of the Tet festival with them. The parents are anxious that the children learn English well and grow in their understanding of and participation in the American educational system and way of life. Every non-English-speaking parent is learning English. One father has been extremely generous in writing Vietnamese translations of center communications to be sent home; everything goes to the homes in both Vietnamese and English.

Contact with Vietnamese adults has been of immeasurable assistance in our understanding of both particular and general needs of our students. The parents have been happy to describe Christmas in Vietnam and to explain Tet to us. We've learned that the majority of these families have been refugees twice: from North Vietnam in 1954 and, again, now. We've seen examples of courage, industriousness, and faith that are truly inspiring. One family, parents, ten children ages 18-2, an uncle and cousin, left on a boat bound for Taiwan. The boat sank and many passengers were lost. All the members of this family somehow survived and have brought to this country a vividly joyous awareness of life.

Just today I visited a family for Tet and came away much enriched. I knew them only slightly but today we talked for several hours, though the father, Anh, speaks haltingly and the mother, Ngai, is just beginning to speak English. During the course of the afternoon, Ngai brought out a picture album and they shared pictures of their family Tet celebration five years ago. I had met Anh's father and two of his brothers, and knew they also have a brother in California. The picture included Anh's mother, three sisters, youngest brother and their families. The parents' home was architecturally and artistically one of the loveliest I've ever seen and the family was obviously cultured and affluent. We came to a picture of a small commercial building and Anh said it was his mother's "second home." I nodded, not quite understanding, as he flipped back to the beautiful home and said that the Communists had taken that home. The small building had been his brother-in-law's pharmaceutical business, but that had been dissolved, and the building is now home for his mother, three sisters, brother, and their families. They then explained to me that when they left Vietnam, six vehicles had been engaged to bring the entire family to the docks. The grandfather and oldest brother, who had been connected with the American embassy, had the papers for the entire family. The cars bringing the grandmother and four of the families did not arrive on time. Officials would not allow the grandfather and those with him to remain on the docks; they had either to board the boats or relinquish their chance to leave. They have since learned that the remainder of the family did arrive but were refused permission to board because they had no clearance papers, and in the frenzy of mass evacuations the officials could not confirm that they had actually been cleared to leave.

It is impossible to respond adequately to such a story. We who are fortunate enough to know these families are receiving at least as much as we can give. We have experienced this with the students from the beginning, and knowing the parents and families explains much of what we could only sense about their children. I include these examples because they help us professionally in our awareness of why a child will sometimes become abruptly remote, reflective. We are watchful for signs of homesickness, try to give additional affection or attention on an occasional sad day. We don't question, but do try to provide a quiet awareness of our understanding along with one stimulation or another which will prove engaging in a happier direction.

In recent weeks there have been many articles commenting on the high achievement and rapid adjustment of the Southeast Asian students in American schools. We have to concur that, while in most ways the students are typical children and adolescents, they do indeed exhibit an extraordinary desire and capacity to learn, they treasure the opportunities to be productive and free, and our country can only benefit from welcoming them.

In four months' time our students have all progressed from being non-English-speaking to understanding nearly everything said to them and being able to make themselves understood in most situations - the survival English level as measured by the Bilingual Syntax Measure. All who are of reading age are reading in English, usually more competently than they can speak.

Their social adjustment at the center, with us and with their peers, has been positive and generally happy. Adjustment in their home schools has followed the same successful pattern.

The ESL program, center concept, and individualization have proved as successful as we had anticipated. With several months remaining in this school year, we project a high level of personally satisfying achievement and adjustment for each of our students.